

Climate report paints grim picture; Action needed now to pull planet back from brink, UN says

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Body

There's a girl sitting in a Grade 5 class today.

By the time she graduates from high school, in just seven years, the decisions the world makes around carbon emissions will determine the environment she grows up in.

On Monday, the planet's leading climate scientists offered two starkly different glimpses of that future. One in which nations realize massive, rapid and sustained cuts to greenhouse gas emissions and yank the planet back from the brink of disastrous climate change consequences.

And one in which we don't.

By 2030, scientists warn, countries such as Canada must slash carbon emissions by almost half to prevent that fifth-grader from living out her old age in a world with increased floods, fires, crop failures, forced migration and infectious disease outbreaks, and to zero by 2050.

That was the conclusion of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Synthesis Report.

Climate change may have once felt like something you had to squint deep into the future to see. Monday's report shows that the choices we make now will profoundly alter the planet today's children live in.

"Let's hope we make the right choices, because the ones we make now and in the next few years will reverberate around the world for hundreds, even thousands of years," Hoesung Lee, chairperson of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, said Monday.

Alongside new, near-term targets, the report also reaffirmed the goal of net zero emissions by 2050, a goal enshrined in the Paris Agreement. But on Monday, UN Secretary General António Guterres suggested wealthy countries such as Canada need to reach net zero even sooner - by 2040.

"This can be done," Guterres said. "Some have already set a target as early as 2035.

"In short, our world needs climate action on all fronts - everything, everywhere, all at once," Guterres said at a news conference for the report's release.

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Federal Environment and Climate Change Minister Steven Guilbeault affirmed the conclusions of the IPCC report Monday afternoon, but did not say Canada would move to a net-zero 2040 target.

"This is a new request from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, obviously one that we will study very carefully in Canada," Guilbeault said. "It's one thing to simply say, well, you know, we want to reach this goal, but we have to give ourselves the means to get there. We do that now in Canada for 2050."

While Guterres referenced a science fiction movie in his remarks, the solutions to this crisis are both well understood, already in use and, in some cases, almost embarrassingly simple. Protecting intact forests, wetlands and other natural ecosystems would have massive payoffs. Solar and wind power are already contributing energy to power grids, even in fossil-fuel-friendly places such as Texas. Bike-riding made the list.

The report is the world's most comprehensive assessment of the current state of climate change. The last synthesis report came out in 2014, and acted as both a major impetus and the scientific underpinning for the historic Paris Agreement, when nearly all the world's governments agreed to reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. That goal is necessary to keep the world within 1.5 degrees of warming, a critical guardrail that, if overshot, will lead to increasingly destructive planetary outcomes, some irreversible.

The synthesis report released Monday concludes years of work by hundreds of scientists around the globe, and will set the stage for a different kind of momentous meeting later this year: a conference at which nations will assess their Paris commitment progress so far.

The actions pledged by nations so far are insufficient to keep the world within that guardrail, and would result in 2.8 degrees of warming by the end of the century, the UN's initial assessment found. The world will gather again in Dubai starting in November to conclude that global "stocktake."

Climate change is a story of inequality, the report emphasizes. The 10 per cent of households with the highest per-capita emissions contribute at least a third of global consumption-based household greenhouse gas emissions, while the bottom half of households contribute only 15 per cent.

The effects of climate change are extremely unequal, too.

Between 2010 and 2020, deaths from floods, droughts and storms were 15 times higher in regions that are highly vulnerable to climate change, places that are far more likely to be poor and underdeveloped, with fewer resources to adapt.

Meanwhile, some parts of the world are already close to irreversible changes - including thawing Arctic permafrost.

"I thank the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for showing the fact-based, science-grounded way out of the climate mess," Guterres said.

"We have never been better equipped to solve the climate challenge - but we must move into warp-speed climate action now."

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